

A pinpoint plane landing

They say things that go up must come down. It's a rule that applies not only to mechanical contraptions like elevators and airplanes, but to other stuff, as well. Even the stock market rises and falls.

The rule, however, is not absolute. Exceptions to the "must come down" part include taxes and the price of Taylor Swift tickets. While I can watch Taylor Swift for free on Sunday afternoon during football season, I'm still waiting for my taxes to drop. Good luck with that.

Airplanes, as a rule, go up and come down at airports, but when things go wrong, they sometimes come back to earth in unusual places. Fredericksburg holds the distinction of being one of the few locations in aviation history where an airplane landed on top of a power pole.

On Oct. 8, 1930, Gus Manhart, of Edinburg, took off from a field near Brownwood in his biplane headed for San Antonio, a distance by air of about 170 miles to the south. His friend, Coy Tisdale, also from Edinburg, rode in the second seat.

With fair winds and clear skies, the plane made good time, but ran low on fuel after reaching Fredericksburg. The pilot, being unfamiliar with the area, circled the town a few times, looking for a clear field to make a landing before finally choosing the infield of the racetrack at the Gillespie County Fair Grounds (today the H-E-B parking lot), the area being flat with no trees.

Hindsights

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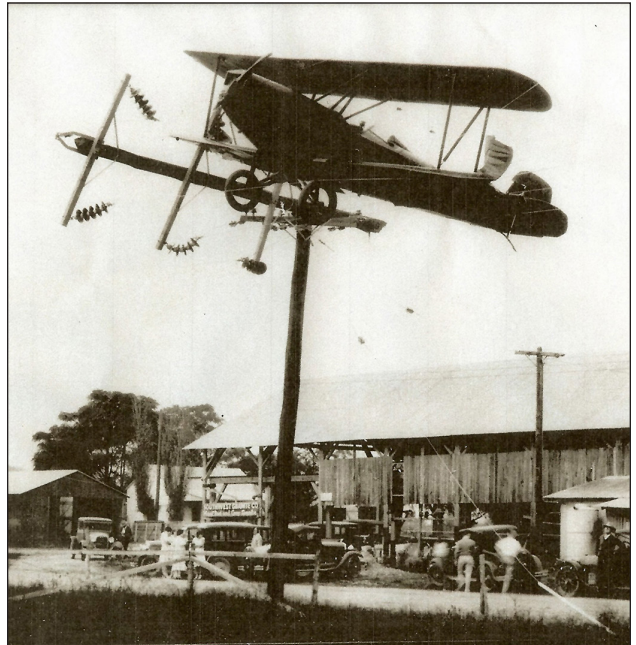
Despite the tight quarters, the pilot landed the plane without incident. Then after landing, he learned of the Temple D. Smith Airport about two miles south of town. He chose to fly there to fill the tank.

Knowing the short take-off inside the racetrack would be tricky, Tisdale, the passenger, wisely stayed behind to lighten the load. Then using every foot of runway possible, the pilot got his machine in the air, but the engine sputtered soon after leaving the ground, causing the plane to drop its nose and lose altitude.

At treetop level, it missed Stein Lumber Co. on Lincoln Street and left skid marks on the roof of Southwest Granite Co. before plowing into a web of high-tension electric wires along Granite Avenue.

The plane struck the wires close to a 60-foot pole. The force of the collision caused the pole to snap. The broken end of the pole and the cross arms settled on top of the pole, somehow managing to hold the 3,500-pound airplane in place, suspending it above the street.

An article in the Fredericksburg Standard noted "Thousands of volts of electricity crackled with blinding flashes about the plane for a few moments, the lines struck carrying the voltage of 66,000,



In 1930, a plane owned by Gus Manhart of Edinburg after a wild landing that left the plane, pictured in the pages of the Fredericksburg Standard, stranded atop a power pole. — Image courtesy Gillespie County Historical Society

before the short circuit caused the automatic switch at Comfort to shut off the current."

The interruption in electrical power alerted the local crew members of the Light and Power Co., who discovered the source of the problem and hurried to the scene. The men grounded all the wires, then raised a pole near the plane to try and get the pilot down. The pole turned out to be several feet short.

So, a member of the Light and Power crew strapped on his spikes, climbed the pole and tossed a rope to the pilot who slid down the rope to safety while "a crowd of over a thousand people cheered."

It took about three hours to get the pilot down. The plane remained balanced on the pole for 24 hours

before finally being lowered by block and tackle suspended between two tall poles raised for that purpose by the Light and Power Co.

The plane came out of the ordeal in fairly good shape, all things considered. It suffered a broken propeller, a crumpled wing, a few holes and some scratches. The pilot announced plans to take the plane apart and ship it back to Edinburg for repairs. He hoped to fly again in a couple of months.

Airplanes go up, but they always come down. It's a rule. If only my taxes would do the same.

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